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Does Reducing the U.S. Nuclear Arsenal Advance Non-Proliferation?

The question is enormously consequential, for if reductions in our arsenal cause threshold states to back away from proliferation, or states whose possession of nuclear weapons threatens the United States and its interests to relinquish their nuclear weapons, then reducing U.S. nuclear forces could increase our security. There is, however, no evidence that reducing our nuclear deterrent has that effect.

Variety of Motivations

States choose to acquire nuclear weapons for a range of reasons. Deterring attack or denying an adversary military advantage are the obvious spurs to nuclear possession. But they are not the only rationales, in some cases perhaps not even the principal ones. Regional distributions of power, national pride, bureaucratic politics, the influence of military in government, and norms of behavior that accord with national identity all affect state choices.

The list is not comprehensive; we cannot truly know what is motivating proliferant behavior. States rarely openly and honestly give their reasons for acquiring nuclear weapons, since possession is often not an end in itself but a means to affect the choices of other states and organizations. Politicians mislead, mischaracterize, and perhaps even misrepresent to themselves their motivations. Historical forensics permit us to evaluate, imperfectly, a state's choices after the fact.

The Iranian government, for example, characterizes their nuclear programs in

terms designed to stoke national pride and a sense of injustice toward those who would interfere. Until recently, at least, that has succeeded domestically: there is widespread support in Iran for their nuclear programs. A RAND study in 2010 found that 97% of Iranians consider nuclear enrichment a national right, although only 32% would support Iran developing nuclear weapons. This gives the Iranian government enormous incentives to maintain the belief that national pride is their motivation, even if it is not their motivation.

It is clear, though, that motivations vary, and often do not remain constant over time. In the U.S. case, for example, preventing Nazi Germany from acquiring a war-winning advantage was the initial motivation for our nuclear program, but the program continued after Germany's surrender. Shifting motivations are the norm rather than the exception, because states find additional justifications, bureaucratic momentum propels a program once started, prestige of the state becomes engaged once the program begins, and compensating actions by regional rivals reinforce security concerns that may have been initial motivations.

In some ways this makes most interesting the cases of states that begin nuclear programs but decide against crossing the nuclear threshold. Two of those cases bear particular scrutiny: Sweden, and South Africa. The Swedish case is one of a country capable of developing nuclear weapons deciding its security was better served by foregoing the possibility: it serves as a virtuous example. The South African case appears to be one of a country developing nuclear weapons in order to preserve their domestic political practices from

outside intervention that disarmed as the result of change of governance. Regime change precipitated denuclearization in South Africa, and there is considerable evidence to suggest the same dynamic was at work in Argentina and also Brazil when they walked back their nuclear programs. The types of governments and their relationship to their population matter.

The salient point about motivations is that they do not correlate to the size or composition of U.S. nuclear arsenal. In the past twenty years, the United States has made significant reductions to its nuclear forces, as have the United Kingdom, France, the NATO alliance, and even Russia; in that same period of time, China, India and Pakistan have increased their nuclear arsenals, North Korea crossed the nuclear threshold, and Iran has been engaged in suspicious nuclear activity for which it will not satisfy International Atomic Energy Agency concerns.

Supply Side Thinking

Because assessing motivations is such an imprecise and fallible art, most non-proliferation efforts have concentrated on restricting access to nuclear materials, knowledge, weapons and delivery systems. The exception to this approach -- and it is an enormous one -- is the extension of nuclear guarantees to American allies and allowing their participation in nuclear missions and planning.

More than thirty countries have the industrial infrastructure and scientific knowledge to develop nuclear weapons. Most of those countries are American allies: Japan, Australia, most of NATO Europe. In some cases they have

lingering historical resonances that an assertive unilateral defense posture would accentuate (Japan, Germany). In other cases they have national identities associated with norms of cooperative international security (the Netherlands, Norway). In all cases except Britain and France, they concluded that sharing in the American nuclear guarantee served their purposes better than developing forces of their own. And even France and Britain would consider their independent nuclear deterrents affected by choices about the American nuclear arsenal.

Those same countries are also the most active and creative designers of non-proliferation ideas, the most assiduous in policing transgressions against the norm. They caught the idea from us and advanced it, because norms spread among communities that have broad commonalities of values and perspectives. It is much more difficult to gain traction where there is little societal commonality.

Reducing U.S. nuclear forces even has the potential to spur proliferation among U.S. allies who rely on the guarantee of our nuclear umbrella extending to their defense. We have committed to the defense of twenty seven NATO states, Japan, South Korea, Australia. They have chosen instead to rely on the promise of our country to protect them, including by use of nuclear weapons. So, ironically, the most effective prevention against nuclear proliferation is the existence of U.S. nuclear forces and extension of defense commitments.

Another argument that is often raised in connection with the non-proliferation effect of nuclear guarantees is that it inhibits proliferation to our friends, but encourages proliferation by their regional rivals. That is, a guarantee to Japan

would incentivize Chinese possession of nuclear weapons, a guarantee to Saudi Arabia would incentivize Iranian nuclear acquisition. This is likely true; what data exists seems to support that proposition. And if preventing proliferation as a universal good is the point of our policies, then the U.S. should withhold such guarantees. But the abstract good of non-proliferation is not, or should not be, the purpose of our policies; it should be subordinate to the concrete good of protecting our interests and our friends around the world.

We would not care particularly if Sweden developed nuclear weapons; we would care greatly if Iran did. We were much less concerned about India crossing the nuclear threshold than we were, and are, worried about Pakistan as a nuclear state. The nature of a state and its international behavior great affect our judgment of the consequences of it breaching the norm of non-proliferation. Fostering norms that reward responsible actors is a worthwhile endeavor, and ought to be high up on the list of American national security objectives. But it is no substitute for protecting our interests and our friends when the objectives come into conflict.

Case Study: Post-Cold War Europe

Questioning the validity of extended nuclear deterrence is, of course, a parlor game of long standing, especially among NATO experts. Europeans worried the U.S. would not trade New York for Paris, worried the U.S. would lose a conventional war rather than escalate to fight a nuclear war, worried the Soviets could succeed conventionally before NATO could make the decision to escalate, and many other permutations. More recently, the German Foreign Minister

advocated withdrawing NATO nuclear forces from Germany. Foreign Minister Westerwelle was encouraged in this by some in the Obama Administration who support the proposition that reductions in our nuclear forces would precipitate reductions by Russia.

Despite the Obama Administration's advocacy, NATO allies unanimously concluded they were best served by relying on the U.S. guarantee and sharing the burden of nuclear deterrence: allies believe that as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO must remain a nuclear power. Three times in the past three years, NATO allies have had the opportunity to walk back their support for U.S. nuclear forces stationed in Europe. The NATO Experts Group led by Madeleine Albright, the Alliance Strategic Concept unanimously adopted, and the Defense Review to implement that strategy all endorse the importance of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy, the importance of U.S. nuclear forces stationed in Europe to "make our security indivisible," and the value of sharing in nuclear missions rather than relying on U.S. strategic nuclear forces alone. They believe our non-strategic nuclear forces stationed in Europe reinforce transatlantic solidarity and give them important ways to participate in nuclear deterrence.

Europe is perhaps the least persuasive case on which to base the argument that reductions in the U.S. arsenal cause reductions in the arsenals of other countries. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has reduced its nuclear inventory by more than 90%. Intermediate-range nuclear forces were eliminated by treaty before the end of the Cold War; the entirety of reductions after the Cold War have been in sub-strategic, or tactical, nuclear weapons. Nearly 2,000 sub-

strategic nuclear weapons were redeployed away from NATO Europe. The Russian reaction, so hoped for by advocates of setting an example of restraint? Nothing. The Russians did not remove a single nuclear weapon from west of the Ural Mountains. Nor did they diminish the role of nuclear weapons in their doctrine (the incapacities of Russian conventional forces have given incentives for increasing reliance on nuclear weapons). The Russians claim their sub-strategic nuclear forces are essential for defending their long land border in Asia, but their deployments remain in Europe. Russian military exercises also routinely incorporate the use of nuclear weapons in Europe, and their leaders casually discuss deploying sub-strategic forces to Kaliningrad as a means of "balancing" the expansion of NATO to include the Baltic states.

History gives few clean test cases for theories of international behavior, but the choices of NATO and Russia about sub-strategic nuclear forces repudiate the idea that virtuous reductions by us will lead to comparable behavior by our adversaries.

If You Carry An Umbrella, It Won't Rain

Even states to which we have not committed formally or by treaty consider our nuclear forces important in their decisions about proliferation, but not in the way the question posed to this panel suggests. Countries of the Gulf, for example, believe that as long as regional adversaries do not attain nuclear weapons, the U.S. conventional guarantee is sufficient to ensure their security. Saudi Arabia, however, has made clear that if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, a conventional guarantee will be inadequate. Other countries in region are also

likely to press for either weapons of their own or extension of the U.S. nuclear umbrella to cover them. By retaining robust nuclear forces of our own, we foster the understanding by allies and countries that share our interests that they may be able to rely on nuclear guarantees from us rather than developing their own weapons. There is a point at which a small U.S. nuclear arsenal would create skepticism it could bear the numerous claims upon it.

It is even possible that U.S. nuclear forces in the numbers being considered by the Obama Administration are small enough to provoke proliferation. That is, adversaries may be tempted to believe if they accumulate more nuclear weapons they could reach parity with or surpass the United States. And while it may seem an odd and empty boast to American ears, the dynamics of proliferation are complex and deeply embedded in national cultures and circumstances. Superiority over American military power would be a compelling claim, especially for countries that cannot compete with the dynamism of American society. The countries we are most concerned about acquiring nuclear weapons are countries that believe they deserve to be great powers but are not -- and those are precisely the type of countries that might see advantage in the claim of replacing the United States as the world's strongest power or foreclosing to it military options.

Nuclear weapons are existential -- their killing power is so destructive and the international norm against their use so deeply engrained that they are distinctive. Creating such devastation by other means would not carry the same psychological effect. The beliefs of policymakers early in the nuclear age, to

include President Eisenhower and Admiral Radford, that nuclear weapons were no more than increased yield explosives, has not proven true. The norms that have grown up around nuclear weapons are extremely powerful.

It is important to recognize that the United States is the main beneficiary of the norm against nuclear use. Having the strongest conventional military forces of any country gives us the ability to prevail in the non-nuclear domains. Whether we will continue to dominate as new arenae of action such as cyber warfare evolve is an open question, but tangential to whether nuclear reductions advance non-proliferation. The main warfighting purpose of nuclear weapons is to render any conventional war against the United States unwinnable. For in conventional wars, sometimes the most capable force loses.

The central argument for U.S. reductions is that it creates a norm of restraint, an example that will affect the choices of other states. To the extent that argument holds true at all, it applies principally to our allies, not to the countries we would be concerned about acquiring nuclear weapons. And yet, even our allies have repeatedly and recently sought to preserve the nuclear forces and commitments of the United States.

The soundest course of policy is to size and structure the U.S. nuclear arsenal to deter attack on the United States, to protect its friends and interests in the world. As in other military realms, sensible planning advocates a wide margin for error. In the nuclear realm specifically, that wide margin prevents any country from believing they could disarm our second strike capability or foreclose our military options.